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AUTHOR Nolan, Joe; Keasler, Debbie
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an Internet advocacy outreach project developed by Southwestern Oklahoma State University for parents of children with disabilities in rural western Oklahoma. The first phase of the project took place in the summer of 1999. Four free 3-hour workshops were provided that were designed to teach the following principles: basic Internet computing, Internet terminology, basic surfing techniques, and surfing for advocacy. Phase II of the outreach project was conducted during the summer of 2000. The University offered a \$25 stipend to all participating parents in the workshop. The format of the workshops was identical for both Phase I and II. Of the four workshops in Phase I, three were canceled due to lack of any registrants. Finally, one participant was registered for the fourth workshop, and it was conducted for that parent. The workshop conducted in Phase II had seven participants, three from the same family. All participants reported that the workshop was worthwhile, and, as a result, they were more capable of advocating for their children. Lack of access to the Internet is discussed as one reason for the small number of workshop participants. (CR)

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Barriers to Parental Advocacy via the Internet: A Rural Case Study.
Joe Nolan and Debbie Keasler, Southwestern Oklahoma State University

The involvement of parents in the Individual Education Program (IEP) for children with special needs is an integral and necessary part of the process. In fact, parent involvement in the IEP process is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In a recent study of transition planning competencies, Nolan (1999) indicated that parents may know what is best for their children, but are often confused when attempting to advocate for their children to gain needed services. This condition is often exacerbated when the setting is in a rural environment.

Perhaps, the greatest source of advocacy information for parents in rural areas is the internet. The internet provides many educational resources and support mechanisms, for teachers, students, and parents.

Consequently, when special educators at Southwestern Oklahoma State University initiated an internet advocacy outreach project for parents in rural western Oklahoma, it was assumed that demand would be so high that people would be turned away. The purpose of this article is to describe the project, dissect the methodology, discuss the lessons learned, and offer suggestions for future efforts in this arena.

The Outreach Project: The project was conducted in two phases. The first phase of the project took place in the summer of 1999. A three hour workshop was constructed that was designed to teach the following principles:

- 1.) Basic Internet Computing
- 2.) Internet terminology and Basic Surfing Techniques
- 3.) Surfing for Advocacy.

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Four workshops were scheduled at the University over four Saturdays in the summer. There was no charge for the workshop or for the materials provided. The event was publicized at least one month before the first workshop and on an ongoing basis by sending flyers to school districts, social service agencies, and newspapers within 50 miles of the university.

Phase II of the outreach project was conducted during the Summer of 2000. Under the auspices of a State Dept. of Education grant, the University was able to offer a twenty-five dollar (\$25.00) stipend to all participating parents in the workshop. Only one workshop was scheduled during this phase. The format of the workshop was identical for both Phases I & II. The event was publicized by sending flyers to all special education teachers in the local school district to distribute among their students. Flyers were also placed in local doctor's offices and in local businesses

Workshop Participation:

Phase I: Of the four workshops in phase I, three were cancelled due to lack of registrants. There was no response at all. Finally, one participant was registered for the fourth workshop and it was conducted for that parent.

Phase II: The workshop conducted in phase II had 7 participants, 3 of which were from the same family.

Discussion:

All the participants reported that the workshop was worthwhile and as a result were more capable of advocating for their children. While the response from the participants was quite positive, it is difficult not to consider an effort with such little participation a failure. However, it appears that more was learned from the lack of

participation than if there would have been an overwhelming response. This is explained below:

- 1.) Lack of access to the internet. It was reported that only one of the participants had internet access in their home. It appears that the internet revolution hasn't yet reached portions of rural America. A recent study reported that less than 40% of Oklahoma's rural schools were connected to the internet. At every income level, those households in rural areas are less likely to own computers than households in urban or central city areas. At every income level, households in rural areas are significantly less likely—sometimes half as likely—to have home Internet access than those in urban or central city areas (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 2000).
- 2.) The school as center of the community. Although only 40% of the rural schools in Oklahoma have internet access, they are still the center of the community and a likely source for internet access and training. For rural areas nationally, the K-12 grade school is a popular point of Internet access: 30% of rural persons use the school for Internet access outside the home, compared to a national average of 21.8%.

Using best practices of the most rural areas. While Oklahoma is a rural state, there have been some environments even more rural that have been using the internet as a tool for educational survival for quite some time. Alaskan educators call these even more remote rural areas "the bush". Alaska has the lowest population density in the nation, only one person per square mile (1991), compared to 71.2 people per square mile for the

entire U.S. While computer ownership is also quite sparse, 90% of the public school libraries provide public internet access. Advocacy organizations like PARENTS, Inc. have set up programs for donating used computers to families (Weiss & Nieto, 1999). Perhaps the most impressive initiative, however, is the practice of schools holding family Internet evenings. At these events, parents are invited to come to the school to see what their children are doing on the Internet and to use the Internet themselves. Through these efforts, parents get to see what their children are doing in the world of technology, and find some assistance to overcome their own technophobia.

Project F.I.T.T.(Facilitating Inclusion Through Technology: A project of Southwestern Oklahoma State University, and funded by a grant from the Oklahoma State Department of Education, has served as a resource for teachers in rural Oklahoma since 1999. It was originally intended as a clearing house of web resources for rural teachers to use in their classrooms. One component of this grant was to train teachers on the use of the internet in general, and the website in particular (<http://www.swosu.edu/~nolanj/fitt/project.htm>). These workshops have met with overwhelming success. In fact, every workshop has been filled to capacity, with a long waiting list. It would appear from the literature cited above, that these workshops would be an excellent avenue to prepare teachers as technical resources in their community. Therefore, an additional goal, based on the findings of our parent study, is to train teachers how to conduct training for parents in their community and to encourage family/school activities such as the family internet evening discussed earlier. Future research might include a longitudinal study of the effects of LEA provided internet training on computer use in the community.

Summary :

The internet has the potential to revolutionize parent-teacher relationships and to serve as a tool for parent advocacy in the many ways. Just a few examples are: e-mail communication between parents and teachers, student, class and school web pages, family Internet nights, informational and advocacy websites for individuals with disabilities, cybercourses, and even cyber charter schools. Perhaps the most expedient way to enlist parents support for this revolutionary new approach to education is to bring the internet into rural homes by having teachers, properly compensated, serve as trainers and resources for their community.

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